

# Norwegian public libraries and governmental reports. Visions and economic realities

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Abstract

## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to discuss visions and realities in recent Norwegian governmental reports on libraries. How realistic are the government's plans? Do the commitments in the reports comply with state budgetary proposals? How do local libraries interpret them and how do they affect public libraries, as they are funded by municipal authorities and local politicians?

## Design / methodology/approach

The methods used are a qualitative analysis of interviews and an examination of the reports and relevant statistical data. Six public libraries, of different types and geographical distribution, have been chosen for analysis. Statistical and economic data have been obtained from the KOSTRA database (Municipality-State-Reporting) from Statistics Norway and the annual ALM (Archives, Libraries, Museums) publication *Statistics for archives, libraries and museum* (Statistikk for arkiv, bibliotek og museum).

## Findings

The budget proposals of the Norwegian government indicate willingness to implement the commitments in the governmental reports, with the exception of the small amounts allocated to competence development and model libraries. The reports do not address the serious challenges facing Norwegian public libraries.

## Importance and interest of the study

The paper discusses the latest official plans and strategies for Norwegian libraries. This should interest library employees and library and information students and teachers, as well as governmental representatives and politicians.

## Value of paper

The in-depth economic analysis of a selection of Norwegian public libraries could be valuable for the librarians in Norway, as well as in other countries, in times of budget cuts, decreasing resources and financial difficulties.

**Key words:** public libraries, governmental reports, library economy

**Type of paper:** case study

## Introduction

In spring 2009 two important and long awaited official library documents were published in Norway. They display the Norwegian red-green coalition government's determination to promote libraries as learning centers and arenas for literature and culture, as well as making contribution to cultural integration and diversity. The bold plans for Norwegian libraries demand a considerable financial lift, which will amount to millions of Euros extra per year in governmental investments, plus additional funding from local authorities. This study is based on these two governmental reports:

- *Libraries. Knowledge Commons, Meeting place and Cultural Arena in a Digital Age* and
- *National Strategy for Digital Preservation and Dissemination of Cultural Heritage*

The reports have been translated into English in Report No 23 (2008-2009) and No 24 (2008-2009) to the Norwegian Parliament. The detailed descriptions and background portions are not included in these abridged and summarized versions, which primarily deal with objectives and measures and the Norwegian government's policy. References in this study are to the original reports, St. meld. Nr. 23 and 24 (2008- 2009).

This paper will focus on how the government's library initiatives are followed up through state budgetary proposals and how these affect local public libraries.

## Design and methodology of the study

Six public libraries have been chosen for analysis. A questionnaire was presented to the libraries with follow-up questions through interviews. One central question dealt with the economic situation of the library, after the publishing of the governmental reports. Specifically the questions concerned media and salary expenses and special reading initiatives, in addition to the significance of local politicians' party affiliations. Statistical and economic data have been obtained from the KOSTRA database and the ALM statistical publications, to substantiate the local librarians' responses. The figures from the selected libraries are measured against national averages. An important part of this study is an assessment of how librarians perceive and interpret the governmental reports. This information is retrieved through the answers from local librarians. On the national level, reactions to the reports are based on discussions in the National Library's mailing list (*Biblioteknorge.no*), blogs and library organizations websites, in addition to articles in library journals and debate columns in newspapers. A short comparison with the economic situation for libraries in other countries is added. Finally, the reports are placed in a political context, trying to explain the ideological foundation of the government's library politics.

## An overview and résumé of governmental reports and studies.

These two governmental reports were the last ones published in a long series of studies from the Norwegian government and the Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum (ALM) Authority. They are the follow-ups of two other major reports: *Library Reform 2014* (ABM-utvikling, 2006)) and *Cultural heritage for all – digitization in the ALM-sector* (Norsk digitalt bibliotek, 2006). The main objective in these plans was to create the *Norwegian nationwide*

*library* through a network of cooperating libraries, across municipal borders, and to create easy access to digital content. They aimed at consolidation and led to the closure of many small branch libraries.

The summing up of all the Norwegian library reports in recent years can be formulated in the following points:

- The Norwegian government wants to develop robust libraries which can offer all citizens better services, promote democracy and cultural identity and preserve the cultural heritage for future generations.
- The libraries are important meeting places, both in physical and digital terms and should promote education, lifelong learning and research.
- All user groups are to be included, especially vulnerable groups which are in need of special attention. The libraries should give simple access to both services and digital content.

An important point in St. meld. Nr. 23 was the recommendation to coordinate functions and responsibilities between the ALM-authority and the National Library of Norway. This question was thoroughly discussed (pp. 113-121) and afterwards led to the closure of the ALM-authority and transfer of library tasks to the National Library.

### **Commitments and economy in the governmental reports**

The reports met with a lukewarm response by the library community. The fact that the reports were not accompanied by economic commitments was disappointing (Tangen, 2009). Plans not backed by figures may be *perceived* as rhetoric and empty words. A similar report published in 1999, under the previous non-socialist government, was accompanied by a large financial package for the whole ALM sector and about 9 million Euros for libraries, even though not realized later on (St.meld. Nr. 22 (1999-2000) quoted through Tangen, 2009).

Because of the preceding high expectations, the library community had reasons to feel dismayed. As one commentator said, this was not a library reform, it was like receiving “a bucket of withered flowers” (Letnes, 2010). There was no analysis or identification of the problems facing the library sector. The plans were introvert, centered on the quality of services and not oriented to user needs (Frodesen, 2009). The overall impression was that the government had not honored its promises.

The final chapter in St. meld. 23 (2008-2009) concludes with the statement that all initiatives must be covered within existing budgets. This simply means that the funding of libraries at the state level must take place within the yearly budget proposition to the Parliament (Prop. 1 S). Below is an overview of the proposals which may affect local public libraries.

The figures (converted to Euros) are listed not only to show the size of the amounts, but the comparison between them.

## **State budget proposals for 2010-2012**

In 2010 the total increase for libraries, languages and literature (the common budget chapter, where libraries are included) was about 7 million Euros. The National Library of Norway was the budget winner with 2.7 million Euros allocated for digitization and developing a cross-database search for libraries. 1.3 million Euros extra were allocated to the Norwegian Culture Fund, for the strengthening of cultural activities. Grants to the National Reading Year 2010 amounted to 715 000 Euros. Only 200 000 Euros were set aside for skills and competence development in libraries and 358 000 Euros were allocated to model libraries i.e. special types of libraries with new functions and activities. The budget proposals for 2011 and 2012 were follow-ups in all areas mentioned above, with a suggested increase of about 6 million Euros. (Prop. 1 S (2010-2011); Prop. 1 S (2011-2012)).

Because Norway has a majority government budget proposals are passed through the parliament with insignificant or no alterations.

The reactions from the library sector to the proposals were mixed. Representatives from library organizations expressed satisfaction with the total budget increase and especially the funding of the National Library and the strengthening of the state programme for literature and reading. There was, however, disappointment with the small amounts allocated to the improvement of library skills and to model libraries.

The preceding report *Library reform 2014* worked out by the ALM-authority, contains a detailed overview of needed additional funding per annum for state contributions towards library reforms (pp. 40-43). The proposals were organized under three target areas containing 25 initiatives. The total figures for the whole library reform amounted to an annual increase of about 50 million Euros in the period 2008-2014. Even if not comparable to the actual figures in governmental budget proposals, due to the lack of implementation of some initiatives, they still give an impression of the wide gap between proposed library initiatives and governmental budget propositions. The government's budget proposals 2010 -2012 amounted to an annual increase of about 5 million Euros i.e. one tenth of the figure in *Library reform 2014*.

A Swedish report, comparing Nordic public libraries, shows that Norway lies at the bottom in statistics for number of visitors, loans and employees, the traditional indicators of library activities. Media expenses and fixed running costs per inhabitant are among the lowest in the Nordic countries (Svensk biblioteksförening, 2007). At the other end of the scale, Denmark and Finland top the statistics for the same indicators (p. 25). To reach the Danish number of employees in public libraries, Norway would need another 2000 library positions (Hustad, 2009). To reach Danish and Finnish levels the Norwegian public libraries would need a real economic boost (Audunson, 2009; Hustad 2009).

## **A selection of public libraries and the effects of the governmental reports**

Local governments are responsible for the financing of public libraries in Norway. Consequently librarians must turn to the local politicians for grants. Six public libraries have been selected for closer inspection. The libraries are the Drammen, Enebakk, Tromsø, Nordre

Land, Vestre Toten and Vadsø public libraries. Apart from geographical distribution and organizational solutions, they have been randomly chosen. The results from this small number of libraries cannot be generalized to describe all public libraries in Norway, due to great municipal variations in economy and budgets. The aim is to give a snapshot impression of the economic situation in six local public libraries in order to capture some general trends.

### **Tabular survey of the selected libraries**

In the tabular overview the libraries are treated on a general level and the focus is on specific services (Tab. 4). After some general statistical information on the chosen municipalities, library statistics relating to visitors and loan pr. inhabitant are given in Tab. 2. The most interesting figures are the local libraries expenses for salaries and media expenses (Tab. 3). The figures are measured against national averages.

It must be emphasized that the local economy and budget situation for libraries vary from one municipality to the next. The libraries are situated in different parts of the country and offer different organizational models (Tab. 1). Drammen public library is a combination library, consisting of three different types of libraries: public library, county library and the library of The University College of Buskerud. Tromsø public library is a combination of the public library and the Tromsø city archive.

### **A short description of the six municipalities from Statistics for Norway.**

As of 01.01. 2010 (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2010)

	Inhab	Size	Type of area	Age 0-17 (compared to the average population nationwide)	Age 80+ (compared to the average population nationwide)	Non-western immigrants (compared to the average population nationwide)	Unemployment/ Disabled people (Receiving disability benefit. Compared to the average population nationwide)
Drammen	62 566	132 km	Industrial	Average	Above	High	Average/Average
Enebakk	10 176	232,6 km	Rural	Above	Below	Low	Low/Average
Nordre Land	6 672	955,3 km	Rural	Below	Above	Very low	Average/High
Tromsø	67 305	2 520,1 km	Rural/ densely populated	Above	Below	Average	Average/Average
Vadsø	6 101	1 258,0 km	Rural	Above	Below	Average	Average/Average
Vestre Toten	12 770	249,5 km	Rural/ Industrial	Average	Average	Low	High/High

Tab. 1

A majority of the selected libraries are situated in new library buildings (Tromsø, Drammen, Vestre Toten and Vadsø). The new premises have resulted in a significant increase in the number of visitors and a considerable growth in the number of loans (Tab. 2). Drammen, Tromsø and Vadsø have nearly twice as many visitors and more loans pr. inhabitant than the average. Those figures are closely watched by the local politicians and the deputy mayors (*rådmenn*) who prepare the budget proposals.

Generally the numbers of visitors and loans per inhabitant in Norway have been remarkably stable over the years and keeps pace with the rising population (ABM-Utvikling, 2010). The internal distribution between loans of books and other media, however, have changed over the years with an increase in loans for films, audio books and computer games, etc.

#### **Library statistics for 2009** (ABM-Utvikling, 2010)

	Visitors per inhab. (4,6) (Average in Norwegian public libraries)	Loans per inhab. (5,24) (Average in Norwegian public libraries)	Employees per 1000 inhab. (0, 37) (Average in Norwegian public libraries)	Notes on the library
Drammen	7,1	6,3	0,45	New library in 2007
Enebakk	3,3	4,3	0,36	No renovations
Nordre Land	2,4	5,33	0,39	Renovated in 2007
Tromsø	8,8	6,32	0,35	New library 2005
Vadsø	7,92	7,1	1,0	New library 2003
Vestre Toten	3,6	4,32	0,35	Total renovation 2008

Tab. 2

While the numbers of loans and visitors have been steady the last ten years, the grants for media expenses have sharply declined in the same period. The public libraries' expenses for media nationwide have decreased from 35.86 NOK per inhabitant in the year 2000 to 29.73 NOK in the year 2009 (all figures in 2009 NOK). This reduction can clearly be seen in the libraries of Enebakk, Drammen and Vadsø. Salary expenses are fixed and determined by local wage negotiations. They constitute the largest costs on the libraries' budgets and give little room for maneuvers and special priorities.

### Library salaries and media expenses (1000 NOK) for 2006-2009

Statistics from KOSTRA database (Municipality-State-Reporting) Norway Statistics. (For some libraries there are statistics only from 2006)

	Salary expenses 2006	Salary expenses 2009	Change in %	Media expenses 2006	Media expenses 2009	Change in %
Enebakk	1 403	1 714	22.16	344	286	-20.27
Drammen	11 370	14 394	26.59	1 856	1 300	-42.76
Vestre Toten	1 753	1 927	9.92	338	348	2.95
Nordre Land	952	1 155	21.32	173	190	9.82
Tromsø	10 430	13 118	25.77	1 400	1 486	6.14
Vadsø	2 154	3 058	41.96	432	402	-7.46

Tab. 3

### Library services and reading initiatives

The year 2010 was proclaimed a National Year of Reading in Norway. In this context, the public libraries are crucial institutions for various services like Books for everyone (*Leser søker bok*), a project to which the Ministry of Culture granted about 700 000 Euros for 2010 and 2011 (Prop. 1 S (2009-2010); Prop. 1 S (2010-2011)). The whole project will last until 2014. According to the Books for everyone's web site ([lesersokerbok.no](http://lesersokerbok.no)) about 30% of the Norwegian population have reading disorders and problems with finding suitable books. So libraries offer services particularly aimed at stimulating reading and improving reading skills.

In January 2009 there were 150 Books for everyone libraries in Norway, among them Enebakk-, Drammen-, Nordre Land- and Tromsø library. Only Enebakk library takes part in Summer reading (*Sommerles*) campaign. All the selected libraries arrange literary events such as literary evenings or literary lunches. Tromsø library is a model library for children with reduced functional abilities. This project has been funded by the Norwegian ALM-authority (*ABM-utvikling*). A number of Norwegian libraries take part in the *The book is coming* service, among them Drammen and Vestre Toten libraries. Enebakk and Tromsø libraries arrange *Senior Surf* on a regular basis. Vadsø library arranges reading groups and takes part in a literary blog, initiated by Finnmark county library called Joy of Reading (*Leselyst*). This library also has a special service for Finnish speaking users. The neighboring public library of Kirkenes has a large collection of books in Russian and about 25% of the loans are to Russian speaking users.

## Tabular survey of public libraries and services for reading and digital competence

Public libraries:	Enebakk	Drammen	Nordre Land	Vestre Toten	Tromsø	Vadsø
Books for everyone	X	X	X		X	
Summer reading	X					
Literary lunch/evenings	X	X	X	X	X	X
Apple libraries					X	
Other services:						
Book is coming service		X		X		
Senior Surf	X				X	
Reading groups						X
Books in minority Languages					X	X

Tab. 4

### Summary and discussion

The selected libraries present a complex and mixed picture of library services in different parts of Norway. While the municipality of Tromsø has a fairly good economy, Enebakk, in the other end, faces difficult economic challenges as the local authorities announced a general reduction in the operating budgets for 2010-2014 (Seierstad, 2010).

The most disturbing figures are the decline in media expenses, which indicate that the quality of these services are dependent on which part of the country you live in, in contrast to the stated goals of the governmental reports. The grim figures must be adjusted, however, through the purchasing programme of the Arts Council Norway for contemporary fiction and non-fiction literature. The books are distributed to most Norwegian public libraries and constitute from 32% to 90% of the acquisitions (ABM-utvikling, 2010, p. 39). All the libraries responding to the questionnaire appreciated this arrangement, notwithstanding they could not choose the books themselves.

In 2003 expenses to public libraries constituted 20.2% of the cultural budgets in Norwegian municipalities, a figure which was reduced to 15.9 % in 2009. At the same time the general expenses on culture had risen with 27% in fixed prices. In this respect, public libraries are long time losers as to priorities within the cultural budgets. In the same period the number of library branches has declined from 892 in 2003 to 784 in 2009, with the consequent reduction in library personnel (ABM-utvikling, 2010, p. 38).

All the respondents to the questionnaire were skeptical to the closing of the ALM-authority and to the transfer of positions and tasks to the National Library. But they pointed out that one had to wait and see for the results. The ALM-authority had been good at building networks, initiate projects and arrange seminars. The National Library of Norway was considered the winner in the state budget proposals 2010-2012, with most of the grants being allocated to the



digitization plans. These plans met with approval by politicians. It is not accidental that the digitization report and the library report were published simultaneously. However, the digitization plans affect local public libraries only indirectly as considerable amounts of this money goes to the copyright holders' organizations. The digitized books available are from the 1990s or earlier and many of them can only be accessed on the National Library's premises, due to copyright restrictions. One respondent stated "The National Library should be more occupied with the library as a physical room. What is a library? It is not only what you get through a screen."

Under the telling title *Would you like to see my beautiful bellybutton?* a library blogger commented the governmental reports in this way: *I do not believe my eyes! Now I have read and read (you know what). And then I read again - just to be sure. And then I thought, was this all? Logistics, administration and internal focus - again!?! Where is the politics???* (our translation) (Frodesen, 2009)

The challenges facing public libraries in Norway are not an issue in the governmental reports. One of them is the fact that more than half the population in Norway does not use libraries. Among those, three out of four in the age group 16-24 prefer to use internet and not library services (Buskoven, 2006). The marginalization of libraries, the competitions from commercial actors, the numbers of visitors, the downward trend of services and quality of collections are thoroughly discussed in a Danish report *Folkebibliotekerne i vidensamfundet* (2010) and especially in a Dutch trend study on public libraries (Huysmans and Hillebrink, 2008). As a starting point for discussion, both of them are zooming in on user needs, in a rapidly changing media world.

Compared to public libraries in Denmark and Finland, Norway is lagging far behind. Entering a typical local public library in Norway, you will find a lone computer in the corner, at your disposal for half an hour, and shelves full of outdated books (Svartberg and Arntzen, 2009). In this respect Norway's strong economy could have made a difference through substantial grants to areas relevant for the public library sector.

What turn the tide are libraries moving into new buildings centrally located in cultural or commercial centers. With open architectural solutions and multi-functional design they can offer new services and experiences, which will attract a wider audience (Nijbor, 2010). This is clearly seen in the case of Tromsø's new public library, where numbers of visitors are rising and the loans are increasing. Local politicians across the party lines generously funded the new library. Even a local bank supported the library.

On the whole, the responses from local librarians seem to support the dominant opinions, expressed in the general library debate. A possible source of error when evaluating the unenthusiastic attitudes to the governmental reports, is that local librarians are simply echoing the sentiments of the library community as a whole, instead of assessing the reports' impact on their own library. The widespread misunderstanding that the government will not honour its commitments, because of the concluding statement in St.meld. Nr. 23(2008-2009) that "expenses must be covered within existing budgets", is repeated in one of the answers. The librarians are positive to competence development, but point out that the means are scarce.

The county libraries coordinate the participation in model libraries and Drammen public library received grants for a project in 2009. Two respondents called for more freedom of action for developing projects and earmarked means for public libraries, perhaps in line with the governmental report of 1999-2000 (St.meld. Nr. 22(1999-2000)). What is clear from all the answers to the questionnaire, is that the library economy is dependent upon special circumstances in the municipal budgets and to a lesser degree influenced by national grants.

### **The economic situation in Norway compared to other countries**

The Norwegian economy is exceptionally strong compared to the economies of many other European countries. The Norwegian government tackled the global financial crisis 2009 with fiscal and monetary stimuli, backed by huge oil and gas assets (Thomas, 2010).

In Europe and elsewhere, because of large budget deficits, libraries are threatened by funding reductions with serious consequences for services and library staff. In 2010 a 7.1% cut every year for four years, was announced in the UK, which will affect the council budgets, from which the library services are funded (Page, 2010). In the US there is a trend that private companies take over libraries as an act of budget desperation (Streitfeld, 2010). A majority of libraries in the US have experienced flat or reduced budgets in areas such as collections, personnel and hours of operation (Guarria & Wang, 2010). It is interesting to note that while the economy declines and services are reduced, the usage of libraries increases, loans and number of visitors rise (Rooney-Browne, 2009; Goulding, 2009). In the Netherlands cuts in funding libraries is expected to be in the range of 6-10% in the years following 2009. The first staff reductions hit the public libraries in some major cities like Rotterdam and Groningen in 2009 and other libraries are expected to follow in 2010 and 2011 (Nijboer, 2010). In Greece, the epicenter of the financial crisis in Europe, the very existence of many public libraries is at stake (Kostagiolas and Margiola, 2011)

Norway's economic situation gives freedom of economic action, as to the financing of special cultural initiatives, such as libraries. With the modest budget proposals for 2010-2012 concerning public libraries, this opportunity seems to be lost.

### **Politics and culture**

The political parties associated with the library plans are the red-green coalition consisting of three parties: The Labour Party (*Arbeiderpartiet*), The Socialist Left Party (*Sosialistisk Venstreparti*), and The Centre Party (*Senterpartiet*).

The ideological foundation of the cultural politics in the governmental reports might be categorized as an "instrumentalist" position. This concept has been much debated in recent years, particularly in the UK, in relation to the art policies of the Arts Council England, the council which is currently responsible for libraries in England (Bunting, 2008). In this view libraries may be seen as instruments of social and welfare policy. Information literacy and reading skills are vital for participation in society and working life. In an interview with the Norwegian library journal, *Bok og bibliotek*, the Minister of Culture, Anniken Huitfeldt from the Labour party, stated: "It is important to make more people come to the libraries. We want

to strengthen the libraries as arenas for reading, learning and cultural experiences” (our translation) (Letnes, 2009). Cultural politics is seen as significant for reducing social differences and contributing to social inclusion. The spreading of culture is important both for diminishing social inequalities and for promoting democracy, freedom of expression and welfare. The government views the library as an instrument of social integration. Reading skills are necessary for participating in working life and so reduces unemployment. They are the opening keys to education, social inclusion and a better life. (Pedersen, 2009).

Public libraries have a mission, which can be explained in political and ideological terms. But the government’s instrumentalist position towards public libraries is problematic and controversial. It is countered by the Conservative Party which advocates a cultural life free from state direction and opposes libraries as instruments of welfare policy and means to obtain other political goals. Culture, literature and art need no external justification. They are divorced from any utilitarian function (Brække, 2009). The other large opposition party, The Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*), which is often described as a right wing populist party, shares this view. It proposes payment for specific library services (computer games, music and films) and cuts in the budget on cultural diversity and integration. Instead, more money should be spent on Norwegian culture and cultural heritage rather than on minority cultures and immigrants (Fremskrittspartiet, 2011).

Would a change in government at the elections in 2013 affect the public libraries, as they are funded by municipal authorities and local politicians? This can only be speculations. But a large-scale investigation on cultural politics in Norwegian municipalities show that in municipalities governed by the Progress Party and the Liberal Party, grants to cultural activities is not as high as in municipalities governed by the Labour Party (Storstad, 2010, pp. 22-23). For the selected libraries, this seemed not to be an issue. The respondents answered that personal qualifications and involvement in library affairs were more important than party affiliation.

## **Conclusion**

The economic realities for the public libraries are determined by the priorities of local politicians. On the local level libraries seem to lose the fight for means in competition with other important objectives like schools and education, health and the elderly.

The governmental reports on libraries are not dreamy plans, but serious efforts to position the libraries as central arenas for cultural experiences, reading and learning. Through the budget proposals for 2010-2012, with an increase in the spending of about 5 to 10%, the government indicates willingness to realize its commitments. The sums allocated to libraries through the budgetary proposals seem insufficient for this purpose. They fall well short of what many librarians argue are needed.

The librarians participating in the investigation did not expect much from the reports, even though appreciating the arrangement of free books through the purchasing programme and the reading initiatives. The modest proposals for competence development and model libraries

were contrary to the library community's expectations. The skills of librarians are seen as decisive for innovation, new services and cutting-edge digital strategies.

The discrepancy between economic realities and visions can be summed up in the old saying: money speaks louder than words.

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